

“A story must have a  
beginning,  
a middle,  
and an end,  
but not necessarily in  
that order.”

*- Jean-Luc Godard*

# The Story of Games: A Theory of Game Narrative

Celia Pearce  
University of California Irvine

©2001 Celia Pearce  
May not be reproduced without permission

# Disclaimer

- PERSPECTIVE:
  - I am not a narrative theorist
  - I am a game designer
- PRACTICAL THEORY:
  - Theory you can use in practice.

Aristotle was not a  
game designer.

# What is a Game?

- Games are about PLAY
- A game, simply described, is a structure for spontaneous play
- The purpose of a game is to create a *fun* and *challenging* experience for the player
- A game is a possibility space

# Narrative in Games

- A Play-Centric way to look at game narrative
- Narrative has a radically different function in games than in other media
- Games use “narrative operators” to **support play experience**
- Narrative in games tends to function at various levels of abstraction or metaphor

# Six Narrative Operators in Games

# 1. Experiential

- Narrative arc of game play itself
- The player experience as it's happening
- Improvisational, emergent, “live,” social
- First person/real time

# 2. Performative

- Play narrative, from audience P0V
- Can be theatrical and quite compelling, e.g., and extremely profitable

# 3. Augmentary/Encyclopedic

- Story layers that augment the experience arc
- Backstory, factoids, personal anecdotes, etc.
- Provides layers, depth and extension of experience
- Janet Murray: “Encyclopedic”

# 4. Descriptive

- The retelling of the experience after the fact

# 5. Meta-Story/ Narrative Overlay

- A specific narrative overlay
- Creates a narrative context for player experience and social interaction and to create tension between players
- Often exists at a highly metaphorical level

# 6. Story System

- Narrative construction kit
- Deconstructed narrative elements; object-oriented
- Gives some or all authorial control to the player
- Can operate in conjunction with a Meta-Story, such as a story world



# Basketball has...

- Experiential: Creates a compelling narrative arc
- Performative: High drama value for audience
- Augmentary/Encyclopedic: Backstory of players; tension between and within teams
- Descriptive: Post game and sports journalism aspect

# Basketball does not have...

- Meta-Story
- Story System

# Golf

- J.C. Herz: It may be fun to play, but it doesn't make much of a story.



# Narrative in Chess

- Abstracted/Metaphorical
- Characters are highly abstracted
- Play pieces: avatars for the player to project onto
- This tends to work better in games than highly articulated characters
- It's also why game characters tend not to work well in film

# Narrative in Chess

- In the service of game play  
Without the narrative, the game has an elegant play mechanic
- Narrative serves to tension between the players

# Chess vs. Macbeth







SAC #182S







SAC

# Computer Game Examples

# EverQuest



# The Sims



# The Sims



# The Sims



# In Conclusion...

- It's a mistake to force traditional narrative theory on games
  - Plot
- Useful to apply aspects of narrative theory that can enhance the play experience
  - Character Development
  - World Creation
  - Storytelling techniques, i.e., cinematography, music, etc.

- CRAFT of game narrative that should be cultivated as a unique skill
- Procedural Narrative

# The End

# The Story of Games: A Theory of Game Narrative

Celia Pearce  
University of California Irvine